

A FEW WORDS
ON THE
CLAIMS
OF THE
MEDICAL PROFESSION
UPON THE PUBLIC.

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CLAIMS, &c.

THE present short outline is not intended as an eulogy on a profession to which its Author has the honour to belong, but as an humble attempt to bring before the notice of the public a few facts illustrative of the deserts of its Members, and, consequently, their claim to public distinction and reward.

Previous to entering his profession, the Medical Student has laid before him the devotion necessary for the fulfilment of its duties, and the self-denial to be observed during his career. His eye is not charmed at the outset, with objects usually attractive ; nor are his other senses regaled either with fragrance or harmony. Human suffering is presented to his view in its most disgusting and appalling forms ; and he is thus taught to take an interest in objects from which the rest of mankind would turn with abhorrence. To overcome these difficulties, it is necessary, at this period, to inspire his young mind with an adequate enthusiasm ; and it is to this very inspiration that mankind are indebted for their preservation under circumstances when other inducements would be unavailing.

A considerable expense is incurred for due qualification previous to entrance on actual practice ; and, the young practitioner, at this stage of his career, has the prospect of many years toil before he can realize an income adequate for his decent support. At this stage, too, and in another profession, he might be able to secure a respectable accession to his means by some monied connexion ; and, though this sometimes happens, yet, in general, the chances are very much against him : as, in the case of the general practitioner, the subject more immediately kept in view in these observations, celibacy is an obstacle to his success. Consequently, the requisite time and deliberation, till some favourable and monied opportunity may occur, are thus denied him.

During these years, he has to encounter wear and tear of constitution, with its distressing causes, to an extent not generally understood. Irregular and hurried meals,—consequently, impaired digestion ; exposure to all sorts of weather ; deprivation of night's rest ; and, for all this, very frequently uncertain remuneration ; and, what is particularly galling to a sensitive mind,—ingratitude : for mankind, unhappily, are not much improved since the Divine Physician had occasion to complain of the ingratitude of the nine Lepers.

Fifteen or twenty years' active practice under such circumstances are sure to make a serious inroad on

any constitution ; and, on approaching the downhill of life, the practitioner, apprised of his situation by some symptoms of breaking up, sees around him a family, from his unwearied exertions reared in respectability and comfort, but who are most likely unable, from the deficiency of their patrimony, to obtain appointments suited to their education and merits. His eldest son may be more favourably circumstanced as the successor to his father's practice ; but, for the rest of the family, the prospect is bleak indeed.

During his active days, accumulation of money was impossible. He was always expected to maintain his family in respectability, and to come forward in public subscriptions, and other charitable occasions, in common with those of ten times his income. Remuneration is besides uncertain ; and, if he receives his debts, it is generally at the expense of a third of their amount ; and which, by the way, may be considered as the average standard of professional loss throughout the kingdom. Unlike a member of the legal profession, he cannot select his cases ; but is obliged to give his time and services to all who require them. For to refuse a case, supposing even no probability of a return, would be the ruin of the practitioner's reputation ; as the Medical profession is expected to be, in the most extended sense of the word, one of humanity.

But leaving out of consideration the public reflec-

tion on character which would accompany such an act of omission, it must be allowed, that, throughout the whole of the profession, there is, in these cases, the most elevated feeling ; and that self has but a very secondary place in the practitioner's mind, when called on in a case of emergency, whatever may be the hour, even to the humblest habitation. It may be here remarked, that the attention of the members of this profession towards each other, in cases of illness, is beyond all praise.

But, in the meantime, labour must not be remitted ; the wants of a family are of hourly occurrence, and go on increasing with their years. The toil of practice, though now become doubly harassing, must yet be borne with patience, for competition to a fearful extent is abroad ; and the indulgence of a single day's relaxation might occasion a serious inroad on the practitioner's connexion. In former years, by an undeviating attention to professional duty, money might have been accumulated ; but, in these times, from the causes I have mentioned, there is no possibility of doing so, and the chances are daily diminishing. A good education, and good principles, with his blessing, it is to be deplored, in nine cases out of ten, will be all the patrimony the father has to leave to his surviving family.

While one sees, in our public edifices, statues and mausoleums reared in pomp and abundance to sena-

tors and lawyers, of perhaps, in the opinion of a subsequent age, questionable integrity ; and to that class of men, called heroes in the language of the times, whose merit is estimated by their success in the destruction of their species, the traveller, passing through the country Church-yard, may come in contact with a simple stone, covered perchance with weeds, recording in unostentatious terms, the dates of birth, death, and profession of the deceased. But to the reader of a reflecting mind, what a deal will be conveyed in these terms. Labour, frequently ill-requited—fatigue—midnight exposure—to storm—darkness and pestilence—humanity called into exercise at moments of the greatest suffering, when there was no other earthly hand, present, able to save.

But the Medical practitioner possesses other claims to public respect than what arise from the discharge of what may be properly called his professional duties.

There is, generally speaking, no class of the community, who, as a body, possess more extended views than the Medical profession—a distinction, which may be readily accounted for, by the early introduction of the Student's mind to the wonders of nature—for the human structure is, of itself, a stupendous and exhaustless volume ; to the beauties of Creative Wisdom displayed in the physiology of vegetable existence, combined with the expanding influence consequent on an initiation to Chemistry. These

ensure liberation of the intellect from those prejudices which are frequently attendant on persons otherwise accomplished, and when these advantages have not been enjoyed.

Of the studies which formed this curriculum, it most generally happens that the Student is more particularly attached to one or other branch; and it is pleasing to see him coming forward and contributing his mite, on his favourite subject, in the form of lectures, for the instruction of his fellow-men; and it is well known, that of the various Literary and Scientific Institutions throughout the kingdom, the Medical practitioner has either been the founder, or is, at all events, a principal supporter.

As Dr. Johnson, in his journey to the Hebrides, alludes, in one of his finest passages, to the then deserted Iona, as a hallowed spot, where the infant scintillations of literature were cherished, and which have since burst out into so glorious a flame; so will this body of men, though, from temporary circumstances unable to betake themselves to its cultivation to the extent they could wish, by a future generation, be considered, as the sacred depositaries of science, who have, by their countenance and encouragement, preserved her from extinction; for wherever she found a Medical practitioner, and in what district, however sequestered, can she not, there she had a votary.

There might be both a greater depth and variety of attainment, in the various branches of science, among this body, were there not an impression abroad among its members, and which is extremely just, that a devotional attachment to any of the collateral branches of Medical science, as Botany, Chemistry, or Comparative Anatomy, rather militates against, than promotes their advancement in their profession; and there are, in this country, many and distinguished instances, who have found to their cost, that an undeviating attention to their every day duties, is the surest path to eminence and wealth.

The first remark that is supposed to be made at the expense of the devotee, is, that he must have plenty of time who can thus devote much attention to matters of science; plenty of time presupposes limited practice; and inconsiderable practice seems to imply, though often erroneously, mal-desert. Again, the practitioner devoted, to scientific pursuits, is judged to consider the interests of his patients only as a secondary matter—an impression, which, provided it obtains dissemination, is sufficient of itself to crush his prospects, supposing his career may have commenced under circumstances the most favourable.

Having made these few observations on the claims of the Medical Profession on public respect, and even gratitude, it may now be proper to enquire whether

these arduous and deserving services have met with the due requital.

First, with respect to the distinction of title, the Medical profession cannot be said to have come in for its due share. It is true it can enumerate, in its numbers, five or six individuals raised to the Baronetcy, and a few Knights; but, in the name of goodness, what can be the reason, why an elevation to the Peerage should not be the reward of Medical attainment, when we see that distinction frequently conferred on indifferent Generals and second-rate Lawyers?

Leaving, however, out of consideration the distinction of rank, of which, by the way, there is no class of men more unambitious, their services seem nowhere to meet with that encouraging liberality, which is often shown to others of a less important nature. Let the following fact be stated as a proof of this :—

In the Lunatic Asylum of the first manufacturing county of England, the salary of the Physician is £100 a year, while the salary of the Chaplain is £300. Now, without underrating or undervaluing the services of the Religious Officer, in this instance, to any one who views the matter as he ought, the Physician should have the greater salary, as his services to an Institution of the kind are all-important; while the attachment of a Chaplaincy, in the establishment alluded to, seems a matter of very

questionable utility ; as the Parish Church is in the immediate vicinity ; and as the inmates, who are sufficiently recovered to be able to appreciate religious instruction, might be sent thither with the greatest possible benefit.

But the object of these observations was to administer a hint to legislative wisdom, that, in the various provisions for public service which this country has munificently allotted, it has passed over the deserts of the Medical practitioner ; less, no doubt, from any inclination to do so, than from actual ignorance of the real state of the profession. And, without wishing to propose any detailed plan on the subject, the Author is humbly of opinion that public munificence could not be more judiciously displayed, than by providing for the respectable maintenance of such members of the Medical profession as have arrived at the age of 60, and who have been in creditable practice 25 years.

Not that he would ever wish to see his brethren considered in the light of eleemosynary objects. No. He is certain that, as well as his own, their feeling is quite against it. Let them, however, have, on the state, for services rendered, and to the extent he has above described, a specific claim of £200 a year.

He is quite sure, from the high feeling that pervades the profession, that, in the event of such a claim being allowed, a very few would be found to

avail themselves of it. Let it, however, be their just right, to claim it if they please.

The Author has now done with his subject ; though, as the indulgent reader will perceive, has by no means exhausted it. And he only wishes that the task had fallen to the lot of some abler pen, to do the necessary justice to the claims of a body of men, than whom collectively, or even individually, there is no class more deserving of the respect of the community.